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## Writing Sample

Amilcar Bettega

Includes "SELF-PORTRAIT."

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**Amilcar BETTEGA Barbosa**

**From the story collection [Leave the Room As It Is]**

## **SELF-PORTRAIT**

The centre, the beginning of everything, is this big and rather sinister house, its windows always closed, many tall trees around it (perhaps a floss-silk tree and certainly a weeping willow). The dirty walls are brownish-grey. You couldn't state as a certainty that it is, or was, a rich house. Just a large house. What else? Of course, the view, invariably seen from above. The façade (the little that appears of it, on account of the angle) and the roof (also very dirty, with moss on the tiles) blending into one another, as it were, in a difficult and by no means explicit foreground. Then a glimpse of the back of the house, where you can no longer make out what is still the house and what are the trees in the garden and their shadows. And a useless detail: a vine with parched leaves, as an extension of what may have been the kitchen. That's about it.

The fat woman doesn't appear till later. She comes from the house, as if she were a part of it that had come unstuck from the rest. She is much more than that, maybe more than the house itself; she may even be everything (it is highly probable that she is everything), but she comes from the house, you see. The house is the beginning, the fat woman is what comes later.

She is immensely fat, with very white arms that look as thick as watermelons below the shoulder. Her thighs must be disgustingly fatter and uglier still (I bet they're covered in varicose veins), but they are concealed from view by a dress reaching halfway down her calves. The dress is indecent. Even if it were ankle-length, it would still be indecent, because it leaves those loathsome arms uncovered. She is lying down. Or rather, she is spread out over a folding bed. She is in the garden, a few yards in front of the house.

The outline of the man is harder to make out. He blends into the shade of a tree, as if he were keeping watch on something in the distance. It would take an effort to distinguish clearly between the man and the dark wall behind him and the shadow cast by the tree. You would have to strain your eyes, or else use your imagination, in which case he clearly emerges, in all his austere decisiveness. Blind? Figuratively, yes. Readiness, that's the word. That man is there, at the ready, like a savage dog on a chain. He is wearing boots, which he seems to be proud of. There can be no doubt about it, he is in the fat woman's service. He certainly occupies a position of inferiority, as his blindness testifies. He conveys the impression that he is awaiting the fat woman's orders, awaiting them eagerly, even. Blind, utterly blind, and I feel there is nothing further I can say about him.

This is the centre, fuller now: seen from above, the (shadowy) house with its dirty roof and walls ditto; then the fat woman in the garden (the grass is an unrealistic moss-green), sprawling all over the bed, and the man in the shadow of the tree like a watchdog. Yet another part of the composition (all of it too dark, in a blackish shade of green) is the wall. It's not easy to say how high it is because of the angle at which you're looking at it from above, but it is thick and grey, enclosing a pretty extensive area which is lost to view in the darkness beyond.

Then, and only then, come the boys. And now we're looking at the outside. There are two of them and they are on the pavement, close up against the wall, in the front part of it, near the corner. They are a few yards apart, and one of them seems to be squatting on his haunches. Age? About ten, maybe less. Skinny, stunted mulattos, looking for trouble. That sums it up.

The boys make the first move, both of them almost at the same moment, as if they had been awakened by a whispered 'Go!' or 'Now!' or something of that kind. On the other side of the wall, the

scene remains static, except for a lazy breeze that is slowly, very slowly, beginning to rustle the leaves on the trees. But the fat woman and the man remain in exactly the same position. They are two rocks. As heavy as stone, as cold as stone, looking at everything with a stony stare. The boys move towards one another, exchange a few words (the sound can only be guessed at, of course). They walk a few steps and stop, walk again and stop again. Repeatedly, staying close up against the wall. Now and again, one of them raises an arm, pointing to the top of the wall.

On the other side, within the enclosure, the only movement is the almost imperceptible rustling of the leaves.

It's easy to see what the little devils are up to. Even before one of them bends down for the other to climb up on his shoulders, it's quite clear what they have in mind. Now the one on top pulls the other one up by an arm, and, in a moment, they're both on top of the wall, peering down into the garden. Needless to say, they are swift and silent in their cat-like agility. They glide along the top of the wall like an electric current racing along a copper wire.

Inside, the fat woman in the sunshine and the man in the shadow remain stock-still.

The boys are visibly excited, their rapid movements come in quick bursts: they advance, they stop, they watch, they advance again... In fact it looks more like a slow and gradual advance, but one seen in a film projected at high speed. They advance, they stop, they advance... Until they eventually find the ideal spot for climbing down, where a branch projects across the top of a wall. A shady spot, of course, where they look even more furtive than before.

Inside the garden, amazingly, everything remains still. The serene, unbroken breath of wind seems to enhance the overall immobility. The leaves scarcely move; nothing else moves at all. With a little imagination you could hear the sound of the breeze among the leaves on the trees.

It's not possible to state the precise moment at which the little devils jump down from the wall. They blend into the shadows and by the time they become visible again they're out in the paved yard. They proceed with their jerky advance, with the scuttling movement of mice or cockroaches, keeping in the shade, never emerging into the open. They nimbly dodge behind tree trunks. The scene is played in complete silence, of course, but even if there were a soundtrack, there would be little enough to hear. They speak only in whispers. And sometimes not even that, communicating by gestures and glances. And they've already advanced a fair distance towards the house.

What is distressing, what becomes intolerable, is the immobility that has settled on everything in the house. The little rascals getting nearer and nearer to one of the windows, probably in the living room, and not a movement from inside. The fat woman and her watchdog in the shadow are still figures hewn from stone. It's quite remarkable how easy it all is for the boys. Now they're peering in through the windows. They run, crouching, to the next window. They try to force it open. They try another one, and yet another. And so they go on, looking for the best way to get inside, a latch not properly secured, or even a hinge with a pin that can easily be pulled out.

And the fat woman still sprawling there! And her two-legged Doberman blending into the shadow of the tree! Now the two little scamps have managed to open a window! Surely it's impossible that no one's going to make a move. That idiot surely can't just go on standing like a statue under the tree.

Can no one see what's happening?

There's the first little rogue, hanging from the windowsill, swinging his skinny little legs for the last heave. And those two... It's difficult to go on.

The fat woman is the only hope. If anything happens, she'll be the one to do it. Yes, the fat woman, at last! At last she glances at the man. It was a very brief glance, only a fraction of a second, and she has now resumed her statue-like immobility. But it doesn't matter, it was enough to unleash all the ferocity that was bottled up in her human watchdog. It was as if he'd felt the touch of a whip, or been struck by lightning: before the first boy has had time to jump down inside the house, the

human Doberman has appeared, making an impressive entrance, holding the two delinquents by the scruff of their necks, one in each hand.

Equally impressive is the ease with which he carries them by the scruff of the neck, one in each hand. To say that the spectacle conveys a slight feeling of relief sounds almost ridiculous, in view of the amazing ease with which the man caught them. The skinny legs that a moment ago were swinging in the air for momentum are now dangling and writhing in desperation. And the man brings them up close to the fat woman. Not too close, though: in fact he only brings them as far as the edge of the lawn in the sunlight. The man looks fixedly at the fat woman, holding the two urchins, who are still squirming like a couple of hares that haven't yet been killed, but can sense that the end is imminent. He is evidently waiting for her to look; a single look of approval is all he wants. That's all he needs, it is written in his stance, in the rough way he grasps the two little imps by the scruff of their necks. But the fat woman scorns him. Deeply scornful, she is once again wearing that abstracted look of superiority. There is nothing more to be done. Sprawled on her folding bed in the sun, she shows not the slightest interest in what the man has caught. It's not her concern.

And he, in resignation, though displaying no resentment, turns his back on the fat woman, extends both arms at full length and smartly swings them inwards, banging the boys' heads together. Twice, with a violence that does justice to his severity. Then he releases the boys, who manage to stagger only a few steps before collapsing unconscious on the ground. The man sits down on the grass, clasping his knees with his arms, and keeping an almost fatherly eye on the boys. Like a nurse by a sickbed, he patiently and attentively waits for the boys to recover consciousness. When they start to show signs of movement, the man stands up, reaches out to them with both hands, and helps them to their feet. He strokes their heads—each boy has an enormous swelling on his forehead. He leads them by the hand up to where the fat woman is lying. And only at this moment, with the boys standing there facing her, does her statue-like immobility undergo a subtle change. Without moving the rest of her body, she raises one arm, and in a gesture of compassion slowly strokes each boy under the chin with the back of her hand, slowly. There is something on her face that is difficult to identify but may well be a tear. The gesture ends and she reverts to her state of immobility. The look on the man's face clearly shows that he feels forsaken, but it lasts only a moment: recovering his self-control, he takes the boys by the hand and leads them to the gate. He takes something out of his pocket—sweets or chocolates, or possibly coins. The boys run off, smiling.

The man returns to his post in the shadow of the tree, and then moves even further back against the wall, where he is practically out of sight. He is soon back, carrying a sandbag in his arms. He props it against the tree trunk and starts punching it with startling violence. He is giving vent to a silent, mechanical rage. His fists seem not to feel the impact on the rough fibre of the sacking, which starts to burst open under the regular, persistent pummelling. The dog-man, kneeling, carries on punching. He hits the sandbag again and again, pausing only to wipe away the sweat that keeps trickling into his eyes. From time to time he glances at the fat woman, but she takes no notice. She is something else again. For a long time she has once again been as motionless as a statue. In fact, the whole scene is once more taking on that look of immobility. Even the breeze among the leaves is dying away; everything is regaining its former still coldness.

And, seen from above, it is the same large dark house with its moss-covered roof, the fat woman sprawling in the sun, the trees, the garden, the wall. Everything is static, everything is impressively immobile. Except for the man, the dog-man, beneath the tree. And that constant movement of his, raising and lowering his arm. No other movement at all, except that arm going up and down, up and down, with fierce regularity, the arm is raised, lowered, and raised again, then lowered again, in a constant rhythm, which, even though no sound is audible, forces us to hear that thing that hits, and hits, and hits, hits, hits, hits.

**EXILE**

‘I’ll close down the shop and leave town.’ How often that thought haunted me! Not that I disliked the city, but the shop didn’t pay its way there. It’s quite strange that I should be saying this, because I’ve never had a shop anywhere else. And look, I’m no youngster! In other words, one way or another, I’ve kept the shop open all this time, though at what cost nobody knows but me.

The shop never attracted many customers, which I regard as a normal state of affairs. People are perfectly capable of living their normal lives without ever needing to come to the shop. It’s even quite possible that the number of customers is the same today as it was when I first opened the shop, and, after all, perhaps I’ve only broached the question now that I’m looking for an excuse to close the place down. But nobody can deny that a shop needs customers. Not just to buy its products, but also, and mainly, to give it an airing. A shop like mine, so turned in upon itself, ends up creating a dangerous atmosphere within itself. Of course the hot weather here helps to increase the feeling of suffocation. It leaves you inert. Sometimes I get the impression that the air in the shop is solidifying into a kind of gel that is gradually filling up all the available space, which obviously makes it difficult to move around in here. Every morning, as soon as I’ve opened the shop, I take up my post behind the counter waiting for the customers. At about midday, when I walk to the door to stretch my legs, I can already feel the gelatinous air swishing around my legs, slowing me down. Of course, the heat is partly to blame as well, it has to be. And I’ll make sure when I move that the new place will be cooler. I even installed a ceiling fan to move the air around a little, but it’s a very high ceiling, so that the fan is too far away. Down here I can hardly feel the effect; all I can hear is the whirr of the blades slowly grinding away up there, which at least is reassuring as it conveys the feeling that the shop isn’t quite so empty. But then arises the problem of the electricity consumption, which has gone up a lot and now forces me to leave the fan switched off most of the time. If the shop attracts no customers, if doesn’t manage to sell its products, if my income is insignificant, I have to cut my expenditure to the bone—that’s basic, it’s in all the retail trade handbooks. I don’t even switch the light on anymore, I put up with a few hours of semi-darkness in the early part of the morning, but I don’t switch the light on. In the afternoon there’s no problem, because the sun sets directly opposite the shop and shines in brightly through the door and both windows, which I always leave wide open. That’s when this placid and gelatinous quality of the air becomes more visible. The inside of the shop becomes yellowed and the air grows thick, with an aged look about it. Sometimes I have to shrink back behind the counter so as not to have the sun directly in my eyes. The sunlight becomes opaque, filtered through the dense air in the shop, but it shines in my eyes with undiminished force. Huddled up behind the counter, I don’t leave my refuge until six o’clock, six o’clock on the dot, to lock up the shop and rest after my day’s work.

In the beginning I used to close the shop at lunchtime as well, I crossed the square in front and went to have lunch at a hotel on the other side. Then the hotel closed down and I decided to have my lunch in the shop, keeping it open all day, more in accordance, therefore, with modern practice. I used to have my lunch behind the counter, in the darkest corner, hastily, so that if a customer came in I would be ready to serve him, preferably without any food scraps stuck between my teeth—in fact I asked the girl who prepared my lunch not to use beans, precisely to avoid problems of that kind.

Nobody ever came into the shop at lunchtime.

But the worst time of day was after lunch, with the heat and my digestion; even though I restricted myself to a most frugal meal, I felt so sleepy that I had to rest behind the counter. I slept, or dozed in a state of permanent alert. Sometimes I would wake up startled by the uproar of the kids running into the shop, playing a game that to this day I still haven’t been able to understand properly. They usually came in a gang of six or seven, as if they were all a single wave of noise and movement. They shouted a lot, pulling one another and laughing. Every one of them seemed to be trying all the time to pull the others, as if they were playing a game of catch in a very confined space—precisely that space occupied by the wave which was constantly on the move all over town and which, from time to time, came crashing into my shop. In time I learnt to detect the first sound of their approach: as soon as they turned the corner of the street, I would position myself behind the door so as to be ready to drive them away the moment they appeared. I stamped my feet on the floor, letting out cries of ‘shoo!’ like someone chasing dogs away. Once I chased them as far as the pavement, where



I was surprised to see, while they were turning the corner, that, at least on that occasion, it really was a pack of dogs making a racket. They are all very much alike.

Although I say these things about dogs and children, it doesn't mean I don't like them. On the contrary, I have a particular admiration for this capacity they have for constant activity. But what I need here in the shop is not kids or dogs, but people coming in to buy my goods. The shelves that cover every wall of the shop are full, and I know that my goods are first-rate. I cannot deny that the complete absence of customers sometimes fills my head with doubts. I also recognise that the look of the shop could do with a bit of modernising—the dark unsightly atmosphere is no great attraction for customers and ends up leaving the merchandise stacked on the shelves even more concealed. But I know for certain that my goods are first-rate. The problem is that there are no more customers in this town. Sometimes I even get the suspicion that the town is starting to disappear. It's as though it were being rubbed out by an enormous eraser, especially the inhabitants, the customers, so that the place looks more and more like a ghost town. Whenever I get tired of standing behind the counter waiting for customers, I walk to the window and stand there for hours, staring into space. Hours and hours and not a single person walks by, either along the street itself, or in the square opposite. And the silence, made even heavier by the heat, descends upon the city like a great solid mass of nothing—a solid white nothing-coloured silence. Nothing but a few dark silent house fronts that seem to be watching me. Nowadays, the silence is only broken when the pack of dogs comes along the street making that racket which might be fighting or playing games, there's no way of telling. They pass by, crazy, noisy, and immediately vanish round the corner of the street—and the silence falls upon the city once again. When the whirlwind of barking threatens to come inside the shop I stamp hard on the floor and shoo them away, which at least keeps me amused. Sometimes one of the dogs breaks away from the pack and comes inside the shop on its own, running round in circles, lost and not knowing where to go, bumping into the counter and shelves until it finds the doorway and leaves. And I stand there enthralled, watching the undulations produced by the sudden passage of that movement inside the shop, the eddies that form in the yellow gelatinous air, like clouds disturbed in the imminence of a storm.

But it must have been the girl who brings my lunch that spread gossip about the closure of the shop. I know that she meant no harm, and perhaps it was only a desperate attempt to save her sole source of income. I had told her she no longer needed to bring my lunch and I had to explain why. It can only be for that reason that, quite suddenly, some people have started coming here, after all this time. Some of them come in silently, with an extremely respectful air, and they look at the shelves a lot. They slyly glance at me as well, behind the counter. They seem quite impressed, but when I try to approach them they go away, thinking who knows what. Others have a certain jaded air, even a somewhat blasé look, and stay only a few moments, leaving me with the impression that they are customers whom nothing can surprise. They have seen everything that exists in every shop in the world, they know everything, and perhaps that's why they have such a sad look about them. They come in and leave again, conveying a sense that they have only come inside in performance of a duty. Some of them wear identification badges, but I've never been able to read what they say.

Only yesterday a particularly interesting couple came in, the man very fat and tired-looking, the woman young and talkative. I was just finishing my lunch behind the counter and I stayed where I was, watching them through a crack in the woodwork and listening to what they were saying. She picked up the goods, handled them and showed them to the fat man, who kept his hands in his pockets and even took a step backwards whenever she approached with the merchandise. 'There's nothing like this anywhere else in town,' she said, thrusting the product at the fat man's chest, at which he grimaced in disgust and moved away. 'In your position, you need to look at this,' she insisted, giving the impression that she was very annoyed. The fat man looked wearily at the doorway. Then she gave her full attention to the merchandise in her hand, turning it over and over. She was about to say something else to the fat man, but changed her mind when she noticed that he was almost at the door, with an air of impatience. Still holding the product in her hand, she went up to the fat man, they exchanged a few words that I couldn't overhear and a moment later they were smiling, arm in arm. On stepping through the doorway, she slipped the merchandise into her handbag. I would have had time to catch up with them and demand payment for what she had taken, but I thought that if I did that, she would only return it to me and I would have to bring it back into the shop.

And, after all, it was all decided. Even if from one moment to the next the shop were to fill up with customers. Even if the shop should become the top-selling shop in the whole world. The next day the girl

wouldn't even be bringing me my lunch any more. The truth is that I really felt very, very tired. I left everything just as it was and closed the shop at six o'clock exactly.

I left the city the same evening, because you should always leave a place under cover of darkness. And I left it by train because that, too, is the best way to go away.

When the train began to move a great feeling of relief and joy came over me. I could already imagine what it would be like doing business in the new place. It was a new life that was unfurling at the end of those rails that stretched away into the darkness of the night. I leant my head back against the headrest and sat there watching the city flow past outside my window, sensing—through the movement of the landscape and lights outside—the train slicing its way through the city. The lights rolled away in the wake of the train, in the landscape that it was carrying me away from. I went so far as to imagine that they were fizzling out in the air like bubbles bursting as soon as the train had gone by. With my face glued to the window and my body twisted round to try and see the bubbles of lights dissolving in the air and leaving only the absolute blackness of night behind me.

It must have been while I was thinking of the light-bubbles bursting and fizzling out in a shower of sparks that I dropped off to sleep. I woke up almost immediately, and outside my window the city was still rolling past. The train was taking a long time to shake itself free from that pale landscape of empty streets, empty houses, empty lights. I dozed off again and woke up again, several times over, and the train was still going through the city. It was only then that I realised what a big city I was leaving. Empty, in darkness, with its sparse lights evaporating in the wake of the train, but always out there, where I could see it through my window. It was unending.

I turned to face the other way, but I could no longer manage to doze off. And after a long time restraining myself, forcing myself not to look out of the window, I couldn't hold out any longer and once again glued my face to the window. And there it was, in the scene made hazy by my breath on the glass, there it still was, the city with its dry house fronts, its cold street lights, ceaselessly streaming past. Again I looked at the lights popping off as the train went by, and my mind was filled with the memory of that gang of kids, that pack of dogs, sweeping like a wave of noise through the city and in and out of my shop. I shut my eyes and they swallowed something.

It wasn't giving up. Neither was it resignation. It simply dawned on me that the best thing I could do was to get off at the next station. That's what I did. And I crossed the rails to the other side, ignoring the footbridge linking the two platforms. I caught the first train that came in the opposite direction, going back to town.

I hadn't the slightest idea of the time, but the night was dense and starless. I still had a long night ahead of me, a long journey, but it was almost certain that I would be back in time to open the shop in the morning.

*Translated from the Portuguese by Brian Gould*